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# Beyond Constructing and Capturing: An Aesthetic Analysis of 1968 Film

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Beyond Constructing and Capturing: An Aesthetic Analysis of 1968 Film

By

Chandler A. Warren

A THESIS

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# Beyond Constructing and Capturing: An Aesthetic Analysis of 1968 Film

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University of Nebraska, 2015

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This study revisits conversations surrounding the global moment of 1968 and the forms of radical filmmaking that occurred during that time. Focusing on the Newsreel collective and the Dziga Vertov Group from the United States and France respectively—groups that utilized very distinct filmmaking methodologies and produced disparate aesthetics—the study argues that traditional leftist film critique must be rethought by acknowledging the revolutionary opportunities afforded to filmmakers through aesthetic elements like voiceovers or intentionally manipulated relationships between image and sound of specific shots. Instead of judging radical films within a spectrum of revolutionary efficacy, the reflexivity afforded to the filmmaker by stylistic experimentation should be given greater emphasis when critiquing such films. To achieve this, the study relies on the work of Jacques Rancière to produce a conceptual framework capable of reconciling aesthetics and politics, which remains a binary that traditionally has been kept separate by the left. This framework highlights the importance of the sensible—literally what can be heard and seen—for a political moment as defined by Rancière, and further justifies this kind of analysis for the critic of radical films as a result.

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## Chapter 1: Debates Concerning Revolutionary Aesthetics

About 45 minutes into Olivier Assayas' *Après mai* (*Something in the Air*, 2012), which revisits the heady days of political activism in early 1970s France in the aftermath of the events of May 1968, a crucial scene occurs in which a collection of revolutionaries gather to watch a film about the struggles of communities in Laos. The film is educational in purpose and to this end heavily relies on a voiceover to describe how the struggle of the oppressed people of Laos is currently unfolding. Following a round of applause from the audience, the directors are invited on stage to answer questions. After a few friendly questions that allow the two directors to explain their approach to filmmaking, one audience member challenges them and their project: "Your films adopt a classical style, like that of the bourgeoisie. Shouldn't revolutionary cinema employ revolutionary syntax?" One director replies that "Such a style would be a shock for the proletariat. Our role is to enlighten them."

In this brief scene, Assayas deftly reminds his contemporary audience of one of the most crucial debates permeating the political left at the time: a debate about the role that culture can and should play in the context of revolutionary struggle. More specifically, he highlights the importance of aesthetics in producing a desired set of political effects—that is, for them to help actualize larger revolutionary goals. This moment, then, sets up a binary through dramatic means that casts one position about the relation of content and form, politics and aesthetics, against another: a position that holds that revolutionary content must be matched by revolutionary aesthetics versus a position that holds that revolutionary content must be formed in easily accessible ways. That

Assayas dramatizes this debate in the context of *film* aesthetics has to do as much with his own biography as with the historical circumstances surrounding May 1968 and its aftermath. This context saw the emergence of radical political filmmaking across the world, including in France, Italy, the U.S., and West Germany, but also in the form of “third cinema” in Latin and South America.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, this debate also permeated intellectual accounts of the cinema, especially in the emerging discipline of film theory and its developments in journals such as the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Positif*, and *Screen*, among others. The pages of these journals were filled with analyses of films based on a mix of Althusserian Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Saussurean semiotics and offered a forum for arguing about the “right” kind of cinema, asking: what *aesthetic* strategies must a filmmaker use if he or she does not want to be always and already little more than a cog in the mainstream—read: *capitalist*—machine?

Taking my cue from Assayas, here, I want to suggest that the binary he dramatizes in the scene discussed above, serving as an illustration for the general political debate among leftists at the time about culture in general and film in particular, has shaped our understanding of political filmmaking to this day; moreover, I take Assayas’ intervention—intentional or not—to be one that asks us to revisit this very binary and re-examine whether it actually holds up to scrutiny, whether it can really be said to characterize the films themselves or whether it was not the analytic lens(es) deployed at

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<sup>1</sup> The Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha, who was making revolutionary films within this “third world” context, stated that true revolutionary action should be vested in the “personal agony” of a specific nation’s people (Hitchens). This notion contrasts other, more sweeping accounts of the 1968 moment that tend to universalize the revolutionary experience.

the time that *interpreted* these films in a binary fashion. The following study will serve two purposes: first, it will focus on two wholly distinct aesthetic programs carried out by two film groups in order to demonstrate the possibilities afforded by aesthetic differences and how those differences arise from particular motives of the filmmakers. Though these motives occasionally include audience reactions, I also refer to motives that pertain solely to the filmmakers and their creative process. This distinction further distances this study from an approach similar to the dramatization in *Après mai* because both the audience member and directors in the film can only highlight exterior motives directed towards the viewer, whereas more individualistic motives on the creator's part are denied significance. Because these stylistic affordances provided these two groups with distinct diegetic possibilities, my thesis claims that further attention should be given to the aesthetic elements of those films. Secondly, I posit that the tendency of leftist analysis mentioned above can be reconciled through the thought of Jacques Rancière and the aesthetics that are required for his politics to materialize.

In order to highlight two drastically different aesthetic agendas, I focus on the Dziga Vertov Group from France and the Newsreel collective from the U.S., two groups that formed in 1968. This year is significant because of the ubiquitous protests around the globe spurred on by various national circumstances. For example, in the U.S., the Civil Rights movement, along with reactions against the Vietnam War, led to nationwide dissent in the streets and on college campuses (especially UC Berkeley); in West Germany, a major cause for student protests had to do with post-war Germany's perceived failure to clean house after the demise of the Nazi regime; in Japan, in contrast,



student strikes had to do with tuition hikes and the renewal of the country's security agreement with the U.S.; and in France, students initially protested outmoded campus housing policies before they were suddenly joined by France's working class, leading to a general strike that nearly shut down the whole country for a few weeks. Yet, even though the two filmmaking groups—Newsreel and the Dziga Vertov Group—responded to this complex local and global nexus of causes, they differed in nearly every other aspect. Their marked distinctions add authority to this study because the analysis offered throughout can account for both of their approaches to creating revolutionary film. In other words, it was necessary to choose approaches that could act as polar opposites in order to show how effective an aesthetic emphasis can be, as well as how that approach differs from a more traditional analysis from the left. By working through the two groups' filmmaking motives and resulting aesthetics, this analysis will accentuate different aspects of these films than a leftist critique would<sup>2</sup>. Whereas Assayas' film suggests that the relationship of aesthetics to the left has largely been one of suspicion<sup>3</sup> and basis for revolutionary viability, the following will look to aesthetics as exactly the scene where political change can be established. Here I mean "political" as a precarious moment and relationship that exists within Rancière's thought, and political because of the artist's attempt to understand his or her own social theories and practices through the

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<sup>2</sup> This can be witnessed, for example, in the way Glauber Rocha reacted to the beauty of Godard's *La vent d'est* (*Wind from the East*, 1970) and how that devalued its militancy in his opinion (Goodwin and Marcus 41), or in Gerry Elshaw's contention with Richard Roud (98-100).

<sup>3</sup> As Isobel Armstrong, drawing on Terry Eagleton's understanding of aesthetics as ideology, puts it bluntly, "The virtuosic feats of hegemony, the look-no-hands trick by which hegemony makes people do what it wants by persuading them that they are doing it voluntarily, are performed through the aesthetic" (31).

stylistic elements of the film. This alternative view of the aesthetic sphere—instead of devaluing either group because of a certain stylistic mode that is chosen (or audience reaction to that mode)—places both groups in a framework that can accept and account for the opportunities that an aesthetic emphasis can present to the filmmakers.

The other reason for specifically focusing on these two groups is for their contrasting material circumstances, which could serve as a productive node for comparison and judgment. Though the Dziga Vertov Group certainly did not have the funding of typical Hollywood films, they did receive monetary aid from and had deals with organizations like the independent Grove Press. This is contrasted with Newsreel's approach to production and distribution which, due to their unique financial situation,<sup>4</sup> created a major economic distinction that further divided the groups. As a result, one might be inclined to view this disparity as the sole reason for the aesthetic differences that are made manifest in their films. As this study will show, this approach would ignore the motives of the two groups and accentuates the tendency to devalue the aesthetic elements of their films. I will instead argue that these stylistic differences owe as much influence to the motives behind the group and would continue to exist if these material differences were evened out.

Though other studies offer a more robust overview of the groups' history, their production circumstances, and their films' distribution history,<sup>5</sup> it is worth offering here a

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Renov highlights some of the avenues through which New York Newsreel financed their films, such as borrowing money from members' parents in "Newsreel: Old and New – Towards a Historical Profile" (274-275).

<sup>5</sup> For Newsreel, Bill Nichols' master's thesis remains the definitive study of the group. More in-depth studies of the Dziga Vertov Group are found in larger studies of Godard,

short description of both groups to help contextualize their distinct situations. The Dziga Vertov Group formed around the student protests and social upheaval of May '68 in France. Categorizing them as a “group” is perhaps somewhat of a misnomer given that, in large part, the films were the work of visionary director Jean-Luc Godard and his close leftist friend Jean-Pierre Gorin<sup>6</sup>. After a string of films in the early sixties that were considered to be masterpieces—such as the influential French New Wave film *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960), *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, 1963), or *Masculin/Féminin* (*Masculine/Feminine*, 1966)—Godard left behind such examples of cinematic playfulness and opted for an increasingly political approach to filmmaking. This approach can be suggested through the filmmaking of *La Gai Savoir* (*Joy of Learning*, 1969)—Godard’s final film shot before the formation of the Group—which could be seen as “[Godard’s] attempt to make a film which would break so dramatically with the existing system of production and distribution that he would never be able to use it again” (Farocki and Silverman 111).<sup>7</sup> The result was a series of films—from their first effort, *Un Film comme les autres* (*A Film Like the Others*, 1968), to their last, *A Letter to Jane: An Investigation About a Still* (1972)—that marked a distinct break from his former work because of the dismissal of narrative significance, and because of the disjointed relationship Godard attempts to create between sound and image; these films suggest a

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but a particularly successful study can be found in Colin MacCabe’s *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at Seventy*.

<sup>6</sup> The collective did occasionally involve others—most notably Jean-Henri Roger, who participated in filming process of *Pravda*, and cameraman Paul Bourron.

<sup>7</sup> The ending to Godard’s *Week-end* (*Weekend*, 1967), which features the words “Fin de cinéma,” is also suggestive of a clear demarcation between the two distinct approaches in the director’s work.

break from other revolutionary film as well because of the emphasis placed on the aesthetic mode at work in the Group's films. In this way, the collective offers an approach that starkly contrasts with the director's response in *Après mai*—the Dziga Vertov Group films “shock” the audience, and their ability to “enlighten [the proletariat]” is consistently questioned by critics.<sup>8</sup> This is consistent with the group's penchant for reflexive cinematography, which they expressed through the construction of a new relationship between image and sound that confounded many viewers at the time (and today). While the notion of reflexivity will be explored in more depth in the proceeding section, I will refer to it throughout the study as a form of introspection for the director, along with a self-awareness portrayed through the stylistic choices of the film. Thus, the reflexivity of the Group is observed in the way Godard uses these films to examine his own class circumstances and through the aesthetic choices that appear to reveal knowledge of their own machinations. In the first section of this study, I will elaborate how these films utilize their unique stylistic elements, how that impacts the audience, and what opportunities arise for the filmmakers as a result.

The Dziga Vertov Group knew—and, as will be seen later, commented on the radical approaches of—the Newsreel collective, which was formed by filmmakers of varying experience in New York City that shared sentiments with the counterculture movement of the late sixties. In the beginning, the idea was to formulate an egalitarian structure of the movement and, reflecting the increasing presence of the women's movement at the time, the Newsreel collective's production structures encouraged, at

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<sup>8</sup> The best example of this is Steve Cannon's reproach, which will be examined in the next section.

least in theory, women to participate in the collective, though the most experienced filmmakers (who happened to be white males) exercised the most control over the group. Still, this inclusion was to both align with the progressive attitude of the New Left and to have as many members available to shoot as much footage as possible. This was in an attempt to both document as many sociopolitical events as possible and to quickly distribute high volumes of films. In a short time, the collective produced a large number of films that gave exposure to revolutionary groups such as the Black Panther Party in *Off the Pig (Black Panther)* (1968) or that highlighted the actions taken against the draft in *BDRG: Boston Draft Resistance Group* (1968). They shot their films in a consistent way: they used handheld Bolex cameras and black and white film to shoot quickly as the action on the streets unfolded and captured sounds with the help of recorders that they subsequently edited to match the visuals, frequently adding a voice over narrative. The group's motive for their distinct filmmaking was largely their desire to create an alternative to mass media and, more specifically, agitprop for the militant left (*Newsreel: Film and Revolution* 50-58). Robert Kramer, one of the collective's key members, tellingly described Newsreel's position: "You want to make films that unnerve, that shake assumptions, that threaten, that do not soft-sell, but hopefully (an impossible ideal) explode like grenades in peoples' faces, or open minds like a good can opener" (Kramer on Newsreel). I will highlight this militancy—which echoes the cries from the audience member in *Après mai*—in the second section of this study, in which I will show how it served as the basis for an approach to radical filmmaking that greatly differs in various ways from its French collective counterpart.

These two filmmaking methods—one more explicitly militant on the level of content and the other more radical on the level of form—mirror the aesthetic output of the groups’ films and solidify the necessity for this type of study. If a critique of these two groups takes a “revolutionary syntax” as its focal point, then the Dziga Vertov Group would be viewed as the more successful filmic model because it refuses to adhere to the prevalent relationship of sound and image in mass media;<sup>9</sup> but proceeding from such a starting point would raise the question of what revolutionary syntax actually is. And if the goal of revolutionary film is to portray the class struggle in a stylistic form that is coherent and engaging, then Newsreel’s films strive to provide exactly this. As a result, these films get placed on a spectrum of success based on style, yet there is no real analysis of how this style is being used in the film. Instead, as has been highlighted, style has *only* been important in relation to the audience, as opposed to how the film or director makes use of those elements within the framework of the film. For the Dziga Vertov Group, their aesthetic—reflexively aimed toward becoming radical—was a conscious attempt to construct a new image that would combat bourgeois film tendencies; for Newsreel, their brief attempts at reflexivity came in poignant moments during their trajectory toward Third World sentiments. And in both cases, this reflexivity, which is paramount for a filmmaker like Godard, would be ignored through readings similar to

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<sup>9</sup> This relationship can be seen in easily consumable films that serve to perpetuate the many cultural layers of capitalism. A mainstream film like Richard Rush’s *Getting Straight* (1970), for example, takes the issue of student protests and creates a nicely curated film featuring Elliot Gould and an acquiescing relationship between sound and image. Even with a revolutionary theme, the film depicts the events in such a way that the audience perceives the film uncritically. The next section will explore how the Dziga Vertov Group’s films, in contrast, disrupt the ease with which their films could be consumed by complicating this relationship.

those expressed in *Après mai*. The next section will more closely examine the reflexivity that can be found in the Dziga Vertov Group's work, using a Newsreel film as a foil, not to denigrate the latter but to put into starker relief the precise differences between the groups' aesthetic "programs." After that, I will contrast a number of Newsreel's films with the Dziga Vertov Group in more detail in order to further highlight the differences that are derived from specific motives and how they function in the films.

Finally, as a conclusion to the study, I will turn to Rancière's notions of politics as a means to reconcile these two disparate approaches to political filmmaking outlined above and discussed below. This will offer a reading of the films that does not exist on a spectrum of success or that weighs certain elements over others, but instead looks toward the way these films depict the actual bodies on screen. For Rancière, whether or not a member of the common can be heard and seen is of the utmost importance, and it is within that discussion that a new understanding of how revolutionary film operates can take place, specifically through the lens of leftist film critique.

## Chapter 2: The Dziga Vertov Group and the Constructed Image

*Un Film comme les autres* (A Film Like the Others, 1968) begins with a group of students and workers discussing the revolts of May '68 in a field—a sight that then gets periodically spliced with black and white shots of the actual events about which the students are talking. As the film unfolds, the viewer is struck by a number of elements that separate the film “from the others.” The most startling and frustrating is that the audience only rarely and briefly gets to see the faces of those who are talking because the camera is focused either on their backs, their feet, or the grass around them, and the soundtrack is comprised (at many times) of multiple voices at the same time.



Figure 2.1. A typical shot of the students in *Un Film comme les autres*

The film never develops into anything further besides other angles of the students that occasionally have a factory in the background, and the shots of May '68—taken from *Cinétracts* (1968)—are devoid of the explanatory commentary that is found in other



documentary films (like those by Newsreel); instead, the viewer must make sense of the images given the discussion that is being carried out by the students.

*Cinétracts*, a collection of short films created by a number of French directors including Godard, provides an interesting comparison to the films of the Dziga Vertov Group exactly because of the aesthetic similarities that it contains to the militant perspective of Newsreel.



**Figure 2.2. Still depicting the militancy and immediacy of *Cinétracts 019***

While *Cinétracts* sought to provide coverage of the '68 events as a form of agitation, the result of *Un Filme comme les autres* is one that “seeks to assault and enrage the normally passive spectator,” as Wheeler Winston Dixon suggests, and is a tactic that “would prove to be the model for Godard’s political work in cinema for the next several years” (104-105). The enraging aspect certainly worked—the audience of the first screening in 1968 apparently hissed and ripped up the theater’s seats—but the “assault”

on the senses is one that is more nuanced and requires more emphasis. The abandonment of the *Cinétracts* approach for an aesthetic like that of *Un Film comme les autres* is indicative of a larger progression that will be further explored in this section. Through the attempt to destroy the capitalist image produced by mass media and construct a new relationship between sound and image, *Un Film comme les autres*—the first official film made under the Dziga Vertov Group moniker—is the first step towards the development of Godard’s own radical subjectivity. By radical subjectivity I mean a realization of one’s class role and recognition of the subject’s trajectory towards becoming radicalized. As will be shown in the rest of this section, this is of particular interest to Godard because of the constant attempts in his films to build an identity for himself that could be contextualized within the larger class struggle. This act of becoming, which for Godard was a lengthy process, stands in stark contrast to more bourgeois notions of the subject that has no stake in radical tendencies at all.

By mapping both Newsreel and the Dziga Vertov Group onto Bill Nichols’ (noted Newsreel scholar and documentary film theoretician) conception of representational modes, I would argue that while the Dziga Vertov Group falls squarely under the “reflexive” mode, Newsreel never fully embraced the elements required of this reflexivity in order to implement social change. While they often employed commentary in their films, Newsreel never explored the possibilities that this form offers to the extent to which it was employed in the Dziga Vertov Group’s films. In Nichols’ words, “Reflexivity and consciousness-raising go hand in hand because it is through an awareness of form and structure and its determining effects that new forms and structures

can be brought into being, not only in theory, or aesthetically, but in practice, socially” (*Representing Reality* 67). When a larger discussion of Newsreel takes place, it will become clear that their motives fell closer to a larger international movement with elements largely influenced by Third World class struggles, where hints of the group’s overall reflexivity can be seen. In contrast, being well-versed in film tradition, Godard grappled more with the “form and structure” of his films in order to question and bring about social change. Thus, while Godard adopted Marxist ideology from around the globe, the emphasis is placed not just on representing and depicting the class struggle in a specific region but also on *how* that representation is determined by social influence as well as the ways in which that representation causes its audience to question and compare that influence to the forms of dominant representation by mass media. This of course can be seen in *Un film comme les autres*, where Godard begins to play with the image, sound, and structure of film, and begins to make films that reflect a particular revolutionary motive to their audience.

While Godard makes use of Bertolt Brecht’s theories about distancing and alienation in terms of breaking the fourth wall in his earlier films, the Dziga Vertov Group’s films modified this theory to extend to the world of non-fiction. In the same way that an audience becomes aware of the constructed aspects of a play when an actor calls attention to them, an audience that encounters a disjunction between what is heard and what is seen begins to question the social catalysts that caused the art into being. In looking at Chinese acting, Brecht suggests that the methods that were employed by the actors “were directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from

simply identifying itself with the characters in the play” (91). From this, Brecht suggests that a social criticism of the play takes place on the part of the audience and that what is needed in the theatre is a perspective that is channeled through a social view. The sensually assaulting effect produced by the Dziga Vertov Group achieves a similar result by disallowing the audience to identify with the characters portrayed on the screen. While the circumstances and medium are different, the outcome is the same: new structure and form are presented in a way that forces the audience to reexamine the intent of that specific medium. This is simultaneously a sensible reaction—“Why are there two voices speaking at the same time in different languages and why are faces not being shown?”—and a social one—“what kind of theoretical background has produced this nonsense?” This ideological question is the one that bridges the gap between *Un film comme les autres* and a film like *British Sounds* (1970), which demonstrates a greater mix between explicitly fictive sections and ones that suggest a more natural link to reality that is often associated with more traditional forms of documentary. Of course, Nichols’ reflexive mode of representation is still at play here, as *British Sounds* is constantly striving to provide both a social critique and a critique of its own form as well; both attempt to raise consciousness about society in a similar way that Brecht called for when discussing the theater.

*British Sounds* (alternatively titled *See You at the Mao*) makes its perspective clear and offers an affirmation of the group’s motives in the very first seconds of the film. A red sign showing the words “British Images” (with “Images” scribbled out and replaced with “Sounds”) is shown while a female commentator suggests, “In a word, the

bourgeoisie creates a world in its image. Comrades, we must destroy that image.” As a result, the destruction of the bourgeois image—along with the construction of a new image with accompanying sound—becomes the task of the film, and the audience must read the film with that in mind. This is crucial in understanding how the group portrays and interacts with reality because it cannot be within the traditional mode of bourgeois filmmaking. In this way, just as a fist breaks through the Union Jack following the voiceover (an image that will appear at the end of the film multiple times), the film suggests it will attempt a similar rupture with the images produced by Western imperialism and the relationship to audiences that capitalism determines.



**Figure 2.3. Fist breaks through the Union Jack in *British Sounds***

This rupture, affirmed as a goal by the Dziga Vertov Group, could be seen as a synecdoche for the rupture separating both the act of filmmaking and the aesthetics of the Dziga Vertov Group from those of Newsreel.

As the next seconds of *British Sounds* unfold and a new voice begins talking about British capitalism and the necessity to combat it, the camera begins a ten minute tracking shot of the factory and workers creating automobiles.<sup>10</sup> In between the loud squeals of the machinery and worker conversation, the commentary is also interrupted by the sounds of a man and a young girl engaging in a sort of history lesson of revolutions carried out in the past as a result of class struggles. Through all this, the motives of the filmmakers become especially clear when acknowledging the influence that Brecht had on the group and the desire to alter the medium through which the images and sounds were being conveyed. At the same time, even an audience without the knowledge of Brecht must question whether this shot is fictional or not, which is never fully answered except that the audience knows that part of the sound (the commentary) being heard is non-diegetic. In other words, even the part of the experience that is known to be contrived—the commentary—is not only convoluted through the man and the young girl but also consistently obstructed by the diegetic sound of the factory. Additionally, the tracking shot means that the workers are only shown for a short time before the camera moves on, meaning the workers never get a chance to speak. By doing this, Godard prevents the audience from associating with the worker and getting accustomed to the setting in general because the grounding for reality is consistently being obscured. The

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<sup>10</sup> Though the camera movement in *British Sounds* is much slower, it is worth highlighting its similarity to Godard's long take in *Week-end* (1967) that follows Roland and Corinne as they navigate a traffic jam. They both follow automobiles, and the noise of the machinery in *British Sounds* is reminiscent of the incessant honking in the *Week-end* shot. While they both serve to critique Westernization and bourgeois ideals in their own way, *Week-end* does so much more obliquely and is also used to highlight the brutality of its central, fictional characters.

viewer does not get to hear the worker's political thought but instead is relegated to the Marxist truisms of a faceless, unknown speaker that is frequently interrupted by an unceasingly annoying squeal. This withholding from the audience continues throughout the film in scenes where, for instance, a naked woman walks aimlessly across the camera's view, a meeting of businessmen is conducted while the face of the one speaking is rarely seen, or a congregation of students takes place without us learning why.

The audience experience of *British Sounds* creates a clear distinction between this mode of filmmaking and other attempts at representing reality in ways that would be considered bourgeois by Godard. In fact, one might look to the Newsreel film *Strike City* (1967) as a secondary way of interacting with workers in this completely different mode of representation. The film depicts workers in Mississippi that have gone on strike due to low wages, their situation in tents during a particularly bad winter, and their hearing in Washington, D.C. where they were denied any sort of federal help. The film eschews the reflexive mode employed in *British Sounds* for one that audiences and critics might describe as being more organic. The commentary of *British Sounds* comes from unknown sources whose authority is altogether different from the workers depicted, and it talks to the audience and workers instead of coming from the workers. For instance, the voiceover suggests the workers need to adopt "the abolition of the wage system," while the workers continue to assemble parts and remain unaware to what kind of commentary will be placed over their captured image. *Strike City*, though it contains a similar

disjunction of image and sound,<sup>11</sup> uses the voices of the community members and splices this sound over the images of them tending to their homes. In a clever way, the film even employs multiple voiceovers at once, which creates particular effectiveness when the sound of a government representative can be heard discussing the lack of funding for the workers while one of the worker's voices is kept softer. The juxtaposition creates its own agitating statement that critiques an ideological sureness like the commentary found in *British Sounds* and allows for an easier identification process for the audience to the subjects of the film.

The comparison above is a similar argument to the one presented by Steve Cannon, whose attack on the formal "innovation" of the Dziga Vertov Group has not only been influential in the study of the group, but is also especially relevant for this study overall because of the questions it raises about variations of leftist aesthetic critique. Cannon's argument responds to Peter Wollen's "Counter-Cinema: *Vent d'Est*." *Vent d'Est* (*Wind from the East*, 1969) is a Dziga Vertov Group film that was heralded by Wollen for its revolutionary interaction with form and image. Cannon objects to this claim in large part because the work of the Dziga Vertov Group failed to resonate with *any* audience that could have reacted in a revolutionary manner. Cannon suggests that the films "block off any real communication with the un-converted," leading to "the wholesale importing of Marxist terminology into questions of film making on a *purely metaphorical basis*, rather than situating that film making within a Marxist analysis of

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<sup>11</sup> As an earlier Newsreel film, the technological complexities of synching sound with image were still being worked out. Even in the few instances in the film when the sound is *supposed* to mirror the filmed situation, there is noticeable lag.



society, with the class struggle, and rethinking the role of film making from there” (80).

This notion is getting at the main thrust of my argument because Cannon is indeed spotting the major *methodological* difference between the Dziga Vertov Group and other filmmaking attempts that were more interested in revealing the class struggle “on the streets,” but his argument eschews any aesthetic analysis beyond stating that certain aesthetics could not resonate with certain audiences. Cannon contrasts the Dziga Vertov Group with Godard’s work on *Cinétracts*, suggesting that *Cinétracts* offered “the experience of direct intervention in a specific situation with a specific, politicized audience” and that “intervention in the directly political sense no longer seems to be a key activity for the *Groupe [Dziga Vertov]*” (78). In other words, what is of most importance for Cannon rests purely on a direct representation of the class struggle where aesthetics should play a part only in making it relevant and accessible for the audience. Cannon suggests that Godard and the Group fetishized certain aspects of Marxist ideology (Brecht in particular) and, as a result, Cannon finds no importance in the aesthetic elements of the group’s work. Cannon’s analysis is congruent with the trend of leftist film criticism that was highlighted in the previous section and serves as an example of why this study is a necessary addition to the understanding of revolutionary film and aesthetics. If approaches similar to Cannon’s devalue all but the concrete class struggle then they ignore opportunities for revolutionary subjectivity that are reliant on filmic aesthetics.

The film *Pravda* (1969) provides evidence to suggest that Godard experienced such a reliance and showcases how reflexive stylistic choices can lead to radical

subjectivity for the filmmakers. In this way, *Pravda* offers an alternative way of situating a societal analysis for a Marxist and becomes part of the Dziga Vertov Group's progression. Though *Pravda* is one of the earlier films by the group and even predates *British Sounds*, it addresses key issues in the group's development as filmmakers. Further intensifying the use of Brecht, documentary, and an ideological apparatus in the form of the commentary, *Pravda* provides the clearest insight into the motives and concerns of the Dziga Vertov Group. *Pravda* provides a critique of the Westernization of Czechoslovakia and depicts the contemporary situation as a revisionist failure that requires action from its people in order to return to a proper Marxist state. Images of Czechoslovakia are depicted while two voices engage in a political analysis of the region under the guise of Vladimir (Lenin) and Rosa (Luxemburg). Here the soundtrack does not partake in commentary as much as in a discussion or didactic moment as the two consider how Czechoslovakia is revisionist and how capitalism has corrupted the minds of its people. The disparity between representations of images similar to *Cinétracts* and formal experimentation through commentary places the interaction with the film on precarious grounds for some audiences. If *Pravda* is viewed as an attempt to concretely display a class struggle or fight against revisionism in Czechoslovakia, then the representation of its subjects would be marred by the contrived and fictional aspects of the commentary.

Such a view of *Pravda*, like Cannon's, criticizes the film's ability to represent reality to the audience based on methodological reasons, as opposed to ideological or aesthetic ones. While one way of gauging the success of a film like *Pravda* would be to determine how well the audience understands the representations occurring in the film,

dismissing the film entirely on this basis alone would fail to acknowledge the reflexivity exhibited in it. This is of particular interest with *Pravda* because these moments of reflexivity take the form of the very imperialistic tendency that they aim to analyze and destroy and, as a result, a critique of the film that *fails* to acknowledge this reflexivity is missing its point entirely. For example, “Vladimir” suggests that Czech films commit the same error as Hollywood films by saying, “Movies are made for the common man. You go to the people, you don’t come from them. You criticize the people’s shortcomings without taking the people’s view.” This statement is doubly ironic because the film (along with other films by the group) commits this exact movement of going to the people instead of coming from them, and also because Vladimir’s voice is supposed to have the answers to the Czechoslovakian issue and yet does not seem to grasp that the film is doing exactly what it is arguing against.

The ideal illustration of this awareness occurs earlier in the film when Czech workers both in a factory and on the street are being interviewed in an attempt to show “some concrete proofs” of how the Czech people “refuse to struggle” against remaining a class being. As a worker begins talking in Czech, Vladimir declares that “If you don’t understand Czech you better learn it fast.” While the sound of the film literally comes from the people, the audience is allowed neither to identify nor to converse with the social theory of the worker. In accordance with Brecht, this makes sense—a viewer may be able to understand the link to real representation but can neither partake nor become acclimated to the medium without knowing Czech. The absence of subtitles marks an absence of conversation and understanding on the audience’s part and, when viewed in

this way, a critic like Cannon reads the film as a failure because the audience is refused access to the class struggle. Though this view has specific criteria for film analysis that it can critique, it overlooks that the film is aware of its own methodology and how that impacts its representations.

A reading that recognizes *Pravda*'s awareness of its own elements suggests that the film contains the key to understanding the motives of the group and their approach to filmmaking, as well as a link to how Godard saw the group performing its unique understanding of revolutionary film. In one of the final exchanges between the commentators, following a close up of a red tram that occupies the entire screen for an extended time, the conversation ends by acknowledging the necessity for failure when striving for social change:

**Vladimir:** We need to make a new departure in the philosophy of images and sounds. It is imprisoned.

**Rosa:** By who?

**Vladimir:** By the revisionist and bourgeois that imprison everything.

**Rosa:** Why do we have to free it?

**Vladimir:** Mao Zedong, who liberated the Chinese people, said that he used philosophy to do it....The task of prisoners is to free themselves.

**Rosa:** You're acting in circles and we're not moving forwards.

**Vladimir:** It's by going around in circles that we advance....Men require a rich experience drawn from both their successes and failures...Where do the right ideas come from? Do they fall from the sky? No, they come from social practices.

As the conversation happens, the camera remains still during a crane shot of a circular dirt patch with a red trolley on it, as if to solidify both the omnipotence of the camera's sight as well as the inscrutable knowledge of the words being spoken. The red tram is worth noting in the context of the film, as there are repeated attempts to view other red objects (a rose on the ground or red wine being poured, for example) and "red" ideology in a way that seems correct to the commentary. Additionally, the shot can be seen as further awareness of the film's approach towards the Czech people as the distance from the ground would suggest an inability on the film's part to stand in for concrete social practices (and hence is symbolically distant from its subjects as well).<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 2.4. Crane shot in *Pravda***

In other words, the film *knows* that the distance from its subjects and the inability to understand Czech is a reflexive strategy used as a critique of imperialism, not an attempt at a bourgeois representation of workers that adheres to the wishes of capitalism. The

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas Murray also highlights the self-awareness of the film's dogmatic ideological voiceover in *French Film Directors: Jean-Luc Godard* (94-95).

exchange also clearly highlights a number of factors important to Godard's filmmaking: the attempt to restructure the relationship between image and sound, the influence of Mao's philosophy on attempted social change, and, though often overlooked, the requirement of attempting revolutionary action and failing. It is this latter notion that I believe can reconcile the ideologies of Godard with the criticized aesthetics of his films in the group.

For Godard, failure was part of participating in the revolutionary moment, and he is quite self-aware about the shortcomings of his films from that period. "You're not just a teacher when you make a militant picture," Godard said. "You are both a teacher and a learner. That's why you make mistakes" (*Double Feature* 44). In the process of destroying the traditional relationship between image and sound and constructing a revolutionary image that was not adhering to bourgeois ideology, Godard accepts the errors inherent in the process as part of becoming a revolutionary figure (approaching radical subjectivity). In many ways, this mirrors the process that is experienced by Paola, the transplanted protagonist of the Dziga Vertov Group's *Lotte in Italia* (*Struggle in Italy*, 1969), who must confront bourgeois ideology on her route to becoming a true radical subject. This happens "through repetitively working through a very small number of images until by reflecting on them she understands how her subjectivity is constituted by the class struggle" (McCabe 229). Though this process is grounded in material circumstances, for Godard, it was carried out through an exploration of the relationship between image and sound in his films; his attempts at becoming a revolutionary should therefore not be dismissed on account of his aesthetics, for it is the very sphere in which

that radical subjectivity is formed. And, realistically, it was the only option that was afforded to him given his social situation at the time. As James Monaco succinctly suggests, “Godard symbolizes the dilemma of the bourgeois intellectual revolutionary: thoroughly committed to radical politics, but prevented by his class and role from participating existentially in the struggle” (217). While I agree with the statement that Godard knew films better than he knew politics,<sup>13</sup> I would suggest that the very act of making these films was revolutionary in and of itself. The films should be seen as part of not merely a larger corpus but also a specific process devoted to revolutionary becoming. “[Making a definite break with what I was] can’t be done in just one day – it’s going on, and it will go on until my death. Probably, my son will continue it.” (Goodwin and Marcus 57). If the aesthetics of the Dziga Vertov Group are seen under the lens of a continuous becoming of a specific revolutionary subject, then I would argue that criticisms like Cannon’s fail to grasp the importance of this process because they are too distracted by a dogmatic Marxist approach to analyzing film.

This is made even clearer when considering how Godard felt about Newsreel and the mode of representation that may be more in line with a militant Marxist tradition.

While he does contrast Newsreel with Hollywood, Godard states that:

from the pictures I’ve seen I think they are working in the wrong way, at least for the moment. They are just trying to spread other information than the establishment. It’s not enough to just show students on strike or people rioting –

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<sup>13</sup> “He knew film; he did not know politics. He could deal with the structural nature of politics because he could compare it with the structural nature of film, and so his politics were expressed in filmic terms and his films spoke the *language* of politics though they seldom came to grips with the concrete issues of politics” (Monaco 214).

the task of the militant film maker is much more difficult. How can you build an image of a riot, how can you build an image of a striker, when you don't belong to the working class? (Goodwin and Marcus 59)

The distinctions discussed earlier become clearest here, as the underlying revolutionary motives for Godard are once again heavily invested in the *construction* of a radical image as opposed to the simple *capturing* of events (and radicalizing them through the production and distribution). In other words, it is not about showing alternatives but about creating alternatives and finding meaning within that experience. By thinking about filmmaking in this way, the preferred mode of representation for Godard is reversed from Cannon's. While *Cinétracts* is closer to a "successful" film from Cannon's standpoint, measuring success is harder for Godard because it is not a matter of audience comprehension or agitation through depiction. Instead, it is a more personal reaction to the way in which the filmmaking occurred and how the finished product was able to create a novel image/sound relationship. The progression of Godard can be seen on this spectrum of leftist aesthetics because on one hand his *Cinétracts* work suggests a desire for capturing the events of May '68 as a radical endeavor and, on the other, he adopts an approach in the next few years that criticizes the very form of filmmaking used in *Cinétracts*. The task of the next section will be to look closer at the Newsreel films and their approach to filmmaking to compare the progression of the group to the one witnessed in the Dziga Vertov Group and to explore their relationship with radical aesthetics.



### Chapter 3: Newsreel Group and a Third World Trajectory

In the Newsreel film *Garbage* (1968), the radical group “Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker” brings garbage from the Lower East Side to the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts as a means of protesting against all that the Lincoln Center represents. Like other Newsreel films, *Garbage* is shot in black and white and contains commentary that, despite occasionally sounding as if an entire room is engaged in conversation, rarely gives faces to its voices. This refusal occurs in Newsreel films quite differently from the outcome in the films by the Dziga Vertov Group because the image shown usually coincides with the voiceover in the Newsreel films. For instance, as the voices discuss the city’s waste removal and its impact on the local communities, the image shown is that of the streets with trash piled on either side. The voice acts as a grounding mechanism for Newsreel that provides additional information for the image being viewed, while it largely serves to alienate the viewer in the other group’s films.

Yet what is most telling about Newsreel occurs halfway through *Garbage* as the camera follows the group holding doors open and welcoming guests in a patronizing way, when one of the members creating the commentary can be heard saying, “Lincoln Center is a falsity; a contradiction of reality. And...we’re just gonna smear reality all over them. Garbage is the shit that is the most concrete way of not seeing things in plastic terms.”



**Figure 3.1. Patronizing guests as they enter Lincoln Center in *Garbage***

This moment can be said to foreground the stylistic norm of the Newsreel group in terms of aesthetics while also representing a key element of their collective motive—confronting the ruling class with the “garbage” of reality. The notion of “smearing” mirrors the militancy with which Newsreel sought to create their films, and “garbage” is doubly essential for both of its meanings: first as an object that is detested by bourgeois ideals and second as the refuse of society that exists on the fringe—the unaccounted for, a crucial part of Newsreel’s films that I will return to in the concluding section. For now the focus remains on the representation of reality that Newsreel chose in the confrontations presented in their films.

While I want to focus on aesthetics rather than on distribution and material circumstance for this study, I will divide the Newsreel films into two camps that resemble the historical trajectory of the group. New York Newsreel represents the early Newsreel

that was intent on this sort of “smearing” where the goal was to capture reality as a means to agitate. Due to a number of factors including monetary issues and internal strife, New York Newsreel slowly vanished by the early 1970s while the focus shifted to Third World Newsreel and San Francisco Newsreel (which would later become California Newsreel), both of which still exist today. Though the necessary work of mapping these groups onto a material spectrum has already been done,<sup>14</sup> this section will view the transition towards Third World and California Newsreel through their aesthetic development. Both groups rely on different motives from the early Newsreel films because their focus shifted towards depicting those with an even smaller voice in the public sphere than those featured in Newsreel’s earliest efforts. And while the production of both groups has been immense since their inception, one can already see the beginning of this transition by viewing New York Newsreel’s approach to different subjects and reflecting on the resulting changes in their aesthetics.

In addition to the confrontational element, the connection created between early Newsreel films and the audience at screenings was as integral to the group’s radical subjectivity as the militancy that was expressed through its aesthetics. Newsreel films were screened with the intent to create discussion that would lead to a heightened social consciousness for the audience.<sup>15</sup> This is dramatized in Newsreel member Robert

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<sup>14</sup> For a comparison of the different Newsreel organizations in terms of production and distribution see Michael Renov’s *Newsreel: Old and New – Towards an Historical Profile* (279-286).

<sup>15</sup> Marilyn Buck and Karen Ross reflect on their methods of street screening by saying, “Street projection is the first answer we’ve come up with so far. We take the films into the street, we stop people on the street, and confront them with our films. Involve them as participants....To those inquisitive, we explain more. To those objecting, we can try to

Kramer's *Ice* (1970)<sup>16</sup> when a group of revolutionaries take over an apartment building in order to politically educate the inhabitants through making them watch films and engage them in political (albeit propagandistic) conversation. Though *Ice* portrays a forced screening, Bill Nichols sees this relationship between film and audience as being a unique aspect of Newsreel, as well as being necessary for the group's development. While the location of the screening largely influences how it is received, he suggests that:

by insisting that we consider the film within a larger context than its internal aesthetics or its extractable "message," by demanding that it serve as the catalyst for debate and heightened awareness, Newsreel has extended its concern beyond the inherent properties and effects of their film medium to the contextual elements that constitute each historical moment in which their propaganda is made manifest. (*Newsreel* 100)

This understanding supplies a counterargument to Godard's assessment of militant filmmaking and acts as another wedge between the two groups. While Godard's line of thinking dismisses Newsreel films on their aesthetics alone, it overlooks the opportunities that their films afford to radical subjectivities created within the audience. One wonders how Godard would classify the reaction to a Buffalo screening of *Columbia Revolt* (1968), for example, which caused five hundred students to destroy the campus ROTC building (*Rat* 8). On one hand, the students' actions are reminiscent of the students

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break their arguments.... We have our confrontation as people, Newsreel has its confrontation through film" (*Film Quarterly* 46).

<sup>16</sup> *Ice* is a fascinating film not only because it can be viewed in reflexive terms but also because of its use of documentary elements and the political message it makes about media. Still, it is more of a Robert Kramer film than a Newsreel film and thus rests outside of the scope of this project.

Godard defends for leading the revolution and fighting with cops on the streets (Goodwin and Marcus 43-44), yet on the other hand they are reacting to a film whose aesthetics are, according to Godard, not militant enough because they lack adequate analysis. While there may not be a definitive answer, the question in and of itself points toward a significant transfer of focus that occurs between the groups in terms of radical subjectivity. For the Dziga Vertov Group, this class consciousness is vested in the stimulation that is caused by their alienating aesthetics; for Newsreel, the viewers' reaction was caused by the "smearing" of the ugliness that they captured from reality as well as the discussion that followed that viewing. As a result, the most significant differences that are manifested in both groups' aesthetics outline their respective aim for raising revolutionary consciousness.

Furthermore, it is unclear if aesthetics and audience contextualization are mutually exclusive in the relationship that Nichols creates above. In other words, if the Dziga Vertov Group *bases* their radical subjectivity in the construction of a new relationship between image and sound, does this preclude heightened political awareness because it does not force the viewer to move beyond the inherent stylistic elements of the film? In what remains of this section, I will argue that while this relationship between film and audience seems to resonate for Newsreel, it should not be employed as a means of disregarding the importance of the aesthetic choices made in their films. Instead, in a similar way to Godard, the stylistic choices of the Newsreel films suggest a trend towards their own increased radical consciousness over time. For Godard, this meant continuously attempting to create a new radical image separate from capitalist media; for Newsreel, it

meant slowly focusing their revolutionary tendencies toward a feminist and Third World perspective.

*Columbia Revolt* (1968) remains the quintessential Newsreel film because of its subject matter and employment of commonly used aesthetic choices. On many levels, the film can be read as an element of pro-student propaganda created around a massive student-led strike at Columbia University. The first four minutes contain shots of corporate buildings as a voice explains how the university has become a “means of production...producing the mechanisms for human oppression.” As the height of the shots moves closer to the ground, the vantage point never leaves the level of the students except to show the sheer number of their congregation. Once the camera reaches that level, the voices continue describing the issues enraging the students—from the construction of a new gymnasium with unequal race opportunities to the influence that industrial entities (geared towards “the war machine”) had over the university board—while the camera maintains that position (both in terms allegiance to the protesters and lowered height) throughout the film. Newsreel had multiple film crews stationed in buildings across campus that captured the images of students occupying those buildings while the soundtrack contains voices including students, Newsreel members, and community members—both demonstration sympathizers and police officers once they are called to react to the students. As the police response becomes violent, the film depicts live images of the commotion alternating with still photos of injured students while participants’ voices describe the brutality. In multiple photos, students are shown severely beaten and bloodied in a way not unlike war photos – not only is bodily harm

apparent from the amount of blood, but students are dazed and bewildered by the force exerted by the police.



Figure 3.2. Still photo from *Columbia Revolt*

This notion reflects the motives of early Newsreel and is mirrored in the sentiments of vocal member Robert Kramer: “Our films remind some people of battle footage: grainy, camera weaving around... Well, we, and many others are at war. We not only document that war, but try to find ways to bring that war to places which have managed so far to buy themselves isolation from it” (*Newsreel* 47-48).<sup>17</sup> This quote echoes the multiple sentiments derived from *Garbage* and the class struggle that the film portrays while also further solidifying the approach of New York Newsreel within a militant sphere.

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<sup>17</sup> John Hess suggests this quote “reflects an identification with oppressed third world people here and abroad so strong as to hinder rational thinking about one’s own situation” (*Jump Cut* 11). While I do think later Third World Newsreel “identified” with Third World people, I would argue that Hess applies too much pressure on this quote in relation to *early* Newsreel.

Moreover, it places the aesthetics of the group at some distance beyond the scope of production and distribution. In other words, it was not solely the limitations of their material circumstances during filmmaking that caused their films to represent reality the way they did.

In that regard, the way in which an event like the student protest at Columbia is filmed and described through the commentary is reminiscent of how early Newsreel approached multiple sociopolitical situations like various worker strikes, a march on Washington, or a rally of Black Panther Party members. In other words, while Newsreel was in this specific mode of reportage, the capturing of the event was of the utmost importance. Furthermore, the raising of political consciousness in this mode found stronger footing in the conversational relationship that would ideally follow a screening, as opposed to a radical subjectivity forged through the individual interaction with the relationship between image and sound presented in the film (similar to Dziga Vertov Group). This can be contrasted with a more nuanced aesthetic practice like the one at work when the subject of Newsreel's focus and representation is changed to one that occupies an even smaller position in the sphere of political discourse, like the Vietnamese people.

*People's War* was filmed in 1969 when Newsreel members went to Vietnam in an attempt to document how the Vietnamese lived, organized, and interacted with their government. Though the footage was confiscated upon their return, it eventually became one of New York Newsreel's longest films at 40 minutes. The film opens with Newsreel's logo—white letters on a black screen that flash and sound as if being shot



from a gun—before the screen remains black while air raid sirens are heard. In this way the opening serves as a foil to the final sequence, where two men work together as they saw through a piece of lumber. As the image of the workers fades, the sound of the saw continues on through a black screen and forces the viewer to interact with a relationship of image and sound that conflicts with more traditional documentary methods that were being employed by the group back in the U.S. As Jonathan Kahana suggests, “this final construction of sound and image asserts that like the work represented, cinematic representation is merely an instrument of a larger project, the ‘reconsideration’ and ‘correction’ of the image of the Vietnamese people in the Western media and in Western ideology” (185). What Kahana hints at is a connective understanding of representation that links this sequence to the approach of the Dziga Vertov Group. By separating the sound from its visual context, the end of the film “constructs” a novel (at least for Newsreel) attempt to approach their method of representation through reflexive means because it moves beyond the realm of purely capturing images in order to agitate. However, the approach also differs methodologically from the Dziga Vertov Group in that Newsreel attempts this reflexivity through proximity instead of alienation. Compared to *Pravda*, for instance, this sequence from *People’s War* depends on a close representation of reality that creates its reflexivity because of this sudden break in image/sound that betrays more traditional documentary techniques. While *Pravda* achieves a similar outcome, that film does it through a reflexive moment that hinges on the filmic techniques instead of making its point through a depiction of “garbage.” In other words, the subjects of *Pravda* are of less importance than the elements used in the

construction of their new image in the film. One can think of the Czech workers in *Pravda* speaking without subtitles and how the film cares less about what they are actually saying than creating a moment where the audience must recognize *why* the film withholds this information. The Vietnamese in *People's War* is most often translated through the voice track, and so the final sequence becomes significant when it no longer adheres to the close relationship with the people it depicts.

Though the rest of the film contains diegetic sounds, voices in Vietnamese (both translated and not), and English voices from the Newsreel members providing commentary, another shot calls attention to itself and solidifies *People's War* as a film that strives to achieve more than earlier Newsreel films. Following a sequence of loud and choppy shots of planes flying overhead while soldiers fire at them with heavy artillery, there is a quick cut to a shot of a woman descending underground in the dark. As she moves further down, the sound of the planes and gunfire slowly fade to the point of complete silence as another shot of the women walking through a dim tunnel continues for more than twenty seconds.



**Figure 3.3. Woman begins her descent underground in *People's War***

It is the longest take in the film and leads to a number of sequences that remain silent and depict underground work of the local people. The shot achieves a more intimate connection with the subject being depicted and uses diegetic sound to create boundaries between underground and above. Despite being within a traditional mode of capturing reality, the shot and the proceeding sequences achieve this representation in a considerably more distinct way than their earlier films. If Newsreel's goal was to show "war films" depicting locals fighting against capitalism and imperialism, then the shots preceding this tunnel sequence are exactly that. And yet the focus is drawn away from that war and placed instead on a sphere that the outside world (and literal sound) cannot breach. The point here is not just that there is a difference in approach when the subject changes for Newsreel, but that this change is manifested in their aesthetic choices as well. Following this line of thinking, one can map out the progression of the group as it

transitioned toward new subjects and a new appreciation of the relationship between aesthetics and audience as a result.

This progression is suggested not only through the discernible stylistic differences but also in the scholarship around the films and interviews with Newsreel members. Christine Choy, a member of New York Newsreel in the early 70s before creating Third World Newsreel, offers the following concerning the change in approach and style between the two groups:

Now, some of our films have ten tracks of sound. Much slicker work. But it works both ways. Most American audiences are conditioned to see slick films; sloppy films do bother them. Both aspects have their own values. The films that have the immediacy, the roughness, have a different type of emotional impact, and a different type of consciousness (Millner)

Here Choy highlights the “slick” nature of films<sup>18</sup> that both early Newsreel and Dziga Vertov Group films attempted to combat while also foregrounding the impact that stylistic differences have on the audiences. This is significant for a couple of reasons: first, it marks the early Newsreel films as eliciting an “emotional” response as opposed to an intellectual or political one; secondly, it suggests that consciousness-raising is directly tied to aesthetics. Though the first part is demonstrated through films like *Columbia Revolt*, where the “roughness” of the film spawned such violent reactions when screened for other young people, the second notion marks a distinct separation from the early

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<sup>18</sup> This “slick” nature does not refer to something like Hollywood films—where viewing consumption was made easiest—but instead to a realization of the degrees of “slickness” that can be traced through these groups’ catalogues.

Newsreel motives in terms of reflexively viewing radical subjectivity. The focus is no longer on capturing “war” or “garbage” with the intent to radicalize classes by combatting bourgeois cinema with that view of reality, but instead on trying to convey another level of class consciousness through the “slick” aesthetic nature of a different kind of film. In this way, the comparison of early Newsreel and Third World Newsreel offers another link to the type of aesthetic experimentation employed by the Dziga Vertov Group.

Despite this similarity, it is clear that while the Dziga Vertov Group was constantly attempting to display their reflexivity through their aesthetics, the moment of reflexivity for the members of Newsreel can best be seen in hindsight. In terms of the “slick” elements of film that were avoided by early Newsreel, Robert Kramer exemplifies this notion and shares a similar sentiment to Choy by stating, “You can have beautiful films and be a revolutionary. It was an error of Newsreel to believe that to proletarianize was to uglify” (Levin interview). This interview occurred in 1976, when Kramer might have had enough time to reflect on the early Newsreel aesthetic in relation to their underlying motivations at the time.<sup>19</sup> The quotation resonates once again with the films discussed in this section and provides further strength for the argument that reflexivity can be seen in the movement towards Third World Cinema, an embrace of altered subjects, and differing stylistic approaches to representation.

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<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that this discussion took place within a conversation of Kramer and Douglas’ film *Milestones* (1975), though Levin’s question was based on a comparison between Newsreel’s “propaganda films” and the political purpose for filming *Milestones*.

Likewise, David E. James focuses on *Teach Our Children* (1972), a film that centered on the Attica prison rebellion in 1971 and was the first Third World Newsreel film, as the film that ushered in a new understanding of anti-establishment cinema for the Newsreel moniker in terms of subject and filmmaker. In relating *Teach Our Children*'s directors (Choy and Susan Robeson) to their film's subjects, James argues that "the minority female filmmakers of Third World Newsreel and the Third World prisoners they made films for and about were alike in previously being most completely the victims of cinematic imperialism, most completely anathema, even for the emerging feminist cinema" (220). This is significant not only because it continues to combat imperialist cinema in accordance with the early Newsreel agenda but also because it extends the opportunity to participate in political discourse to the fringe of society. No longer does the film rely on interviews in order to portray one image of Columbia students and another image of police. Instead, *Teach Our Children* uses interviews of inmates to create connections to poor, urban, minority communities. As a result, James sees "a recurrent intratextual reflexivity, a politicized equivalent of and heir to the underground's own filmic self-consciousness" (220) when comparing Third World Newsreel to those earlier Newsreel attempts. What is necessary to keep in mind, though, is that the impetus for this new direction actually began in early Newsreel and appeared through aesthetic outliers like the tunnel sequence described in *People's War*. The methodology, subject, and location changed for *People's War*, but that sequence, along with the closing

sequence, attempted a filmic reflexivity before a broader reflexive moment took place years later.

This progression of Newsreel that has been suggested is essential for this study because it allows for the greatest connection between Newsreel and the Dziga Vertov Group to be forged—the extension of public discourse to those who were largely blocked from it. Because early Newsreel was more concerned with representations of reality that would agitate and combat capitalist cinema and ideals, the shift towards recognizing the importance of those on the fringe of society took time to completely materialize. Moments occurred in early Newsreel where this attempt was more at the fore—not only in *People's War* but also, according to Kahana, in *No Game* (1967)<sup>20</sup>—but they were fleeting moments that offered more of a glimpse of the focus to come than a convention at the time. Yet as Third World Newsreel and its approach to filmmaking suggests, this tendency of broadening political discourse is achieved in spite of observable differences in motivation, aesthetic practice, and reflexivity between the Newsreel progression and the Dziga Vertov Group. In the concluding section, I will expound on this idea through a conceptual framework derived from Rancière's work; I will do so

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<sup>20</sup> Considered to be the first collaborative effort of the Newsreel group, *No Game* centers on an anti-war demonstration that features a speech at the end of the film's soundtrack about the loss of hope and inability to act. Kahana reads the speech as being “modeled on the Enlightenment concept of the public sphere of rational discourse” and goes on to say that “The Movement often expressed the view that the ideal of the public sphere was theoretically and politically flawed because of the way that access to the sphere of rational debate had historically been limited to the white male bourgeoisie” (179). While this moment could have a part in this discussion, it is largely on methodological as opposed to aesthetic grounds.

in order to demonstrate how this extension operates and to describe how such disparate filmmaking modes can ultimately be accomplishing a similar outcome.



## Chapter 4: Delineating the Politics of Aesthetics

Jacques Rancière's framework of politics is drawn from Greek democratic states and, as a result, relies on the precarious relationship between those that govern and those that are left out. The *demos* of the Greek society—"the people," "the common"—occupied a place outside of those that exercised the power of the *arkhe*, "to begin," "to lead." The interaction is not political because it exists between distinct subjects, but because it creates a subject through (and only through) the relationship between the two distinct experiences. In a ruling system that operates on a basis of being counted—those that ruled had a say in the governance while the *demos* did not—the attempt by the *demos* to be accounted for and to be heard creates a political relationship for Rancière. In other words, politics does not exist as a relationship between political subjects but arises precisely when the *demos* are no longer part of the ruled. "Democracy," then, "is the specific situation in which it is the absence of entitlement that entitles one to exercise the *arkhe*. It is the commencement without commencement, a form of rule that does not command...But this situation of exception is identical with the very condition that more generally makes politics in its specificity possible" (*Dissensus* 31). Here Rancière's definition of democracy develops alongside his definition of politics, both of which rest on the precarious and fleeting moment "of exception" that occurs when the *demos* breaks the regulated elements of their refused participation. For the Greek politic, this participation meant being heard when constantly kept quiet; being visible in a space that was common but could not originally be occupied by the *demos*.

This participation allows Rancière to tie the sensible inherently into the political; in this system, sensible refers not to what is deemed prudent or diligent, but to the actual senses experienced through the body. “Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it,” Rancière suggests, “around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak” (*The Politics* 13). Hence, the organized nature of the *polis* is referred to by Rancière as the “distribution of the sensible”—an account of the participation and outcomes of that participation (what can be seen, heard, and so forth), which is disrupted and redistributed during political moments. In this schema, the police is a force that acts against political subjects by maintaining the established categories of participation. One can think of the typical declaration by the actual police force—only one element that determines the distribution of the sensible— “Move along! Nothing to see here!” The regularity of the scene works to suppress any sort of disorder that might disrupt it and any appearance of the political subject that would seek to redistribute the sensible in that space (*Dissensus* 37). This framework of the political that arises against the police is crucial for understanding Rancière’s “equality,” which exists exactly within this kind of redistribution and stems from the subjectification (*La Subjectivation*) of a political subject.

It is with this subjectification that Rancière’s politics is relevant for this study, for both groups—the Dziga Vertov Group and Newsreel—can be seen intently reconfiguring the gap between identity and experience that exists for the common. In the same way the police determines the sensible and categorizing tendencies of the *polis*, so too does it determine the identities of bodies regardless of their actual experience. Rancière claims

that “‘Worker,’ or better still ‘proletarian,’ is similarly the subject that measures the gap between the part of work as social function and the having no part of those who carry it out within the definition of the common of the community. All political subjectification is the manifestation of a gap of this kind” (*Disagreement* 36). This gap between the identity dictated by the police and the experience within the community establishes an opportunity for equality that is vested in the reaction of the members that comprise that community to the name established for them. In other words, in the case of “proletarian,” “what is subjectified is neither work nor destitution, but the simple counting of the uncounted, the difference between an inequalitarian distribution of social bodies and the equality of speaking beings” (*Disagreement* 38). Subjectification, then, is required for sensible reaction by the political subject that then triggers a moment of equality and recognition in the *polis*. In order for it to occur, subjectification first requires this kind of gap between identification and experience, and then must be completed within the realm of the sensible—that is, the realm of the aesthetic. In this way, the opportunity for Rancière’s political equality cannot be realized in a distant understanding of the involved parties in politics, but instead must be inscribed in an attempt to ground representation of those parties in lived, actual experience—to sensibly display and confront this “gap” instead of continuing to partake in it. From here, we can see how both the Dziga Vertov Group and Newsreel demonstrated this notion by approaching their films in a way that contrasts the form and emphasis of a standard Marxist film critique.

As has been outlined above, Godard and the Dziga Vertov Group achieved this subjectification through reflexive means, causing an intersection between the political as

defined above and the progression of radical becoming that can be mapped onto Godard's filmic experimentation. Taking *Pravda* as an example of this heightened reflexivity, Rancière's politics can be mapped onto the aesthetic elements of the film in order to recodify those elements as examples of political equality. The worker whose voice is *heard* but cannot be *understood* constitutes the best example of this reflexive awareness of the gap between established categories coming from the police and experienced identity arising from the precarious political subject. Another film that might genuinely approach the worker as exactly that identity, or even the category of "proletariat," is reinforcing and engaging in the police order—"Nothing to see here!" At the moment the audience is confronted with this worker who is made voiceless through the aesthetics of the film, they become aware of the disjunction between the representation of the worker's identity as "Czech worker" and the actuality of that same body in the lived experience of something altogether different<sup>21</sup>. Their interaction with him is no longer just another part in the categorizing process, but a realization of both the filmic elements at work and of the gap created when that body would otherwise still belong to the "uncounted" of the

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<sup>21</sup> Another succinct definition of politics and how it interacts with bodies: "Politics breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the 'natural' order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of rule or of being ruled, assigning them to private or public lives, pinning them down to a certain time and space, to specific 'bodies,' that is to specific ways of being, seeing and saying. This 'natural' logic, a distribution of the invisible and visible, of speech and noise, pins bodies to 'their' places and allocates the private and the public to distinct 'part' – this is the order of the police. Politics can therefore be defined by way of contrast as the activity that breaks with the order of the police by inventing new subjects. Politics invents new forms of collective enunciation; it re-frames the given by inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time—in short, new bodily capacities" (*Dissensus* 139).

faceless “Czech worker.” The awareness on the film’s side of this disjointed and political moment— “If you don’t understand Czech you better learn it fast” —marks the junction of Godard as experimenter/filmmaker and the film as politics as defined by Rancière.

Likewise, *Newsreel* attempts a similar interrogation of this same gap, but the confrontation takes place in an outward interaction as opposed to an inward reflexivity. A moment like the woman descending the tunnel in *People’s War* fits within such an interrogation because of both its use of sound and its denial of voices. In this moment, determined categories like “Vietnamese,” “women,” or “worker” are no longer needed, nor is there any voice diegetically produced in the scene or through the commentary. Contextualized, this moment produces a redistribution of the sensible within the film, marking a political moment that acts to produce new “bodily capacities” of the people depicted through the experience on the screen. While the film strives to understand the plight of the Vietnamese people, this moment in particular is made markedly political because it *does not* rely on that distinction—because the bodies shown no longer require that position in the police order. The silence of the moment initially reads as an awareness of the underground safety amidst a firefight above, yet in this framework it serves to emphasize the position of silence that these bodies occupy in the *demos*. Their inability to speak—literally to be heard by those in power—is reinscribed by the silence experienced by both those bodies and in the audience proper. Compared to *Pravda*, the speech of the workers in *People’s War* is not reflexively interrogated, but is instead emphasized within the depiction of their silence. This moment and film, as witnessed above, can be seen on the progression of the group toward other similar topics of

documentary; even though the moniker “Third World Newsreel” becomes a direct adherence to police order, the films themselves still offer additional opportunities to outwardly interact with bodies found in the *demos* and still contain the ability to produce subjectification as a result.

Applying Rancière’s politics to these two moments created by these groups affords critics another mode through which radical films can be analyzed and connected. Throughout this study, great emphasis has been placed on the disparity between these two groups in multiple aspects of their approach—underlying motives, filmic techniques, understanding of militancy, and so on. As a result, these groups can be placed on a spectrum of success in a number of ways depending on the critic. One can compare their theory versus their praxis, their engagement with the audience on multiple levels or their reflexivity (or lack thereof). In other words, thinking along Marxist terms that take such elements into account, one would be in a position (like Cannon) not just to place these film groups and their films on a spectrum but also to label one successful and one not. Yet Rancière’s thought offers a form of reconciliation of the two approaches and eschews the tendency to determine success along such conditions. Following Rancière, there is no:

criteria for distinguishing good political films from bad political films. In fact, we should avoid asking the question in terms of criteria for the political evaluation of works of art. The politics of works of art plays itself out...in the way in which modes of narration or new forms of visibility established by artistic practices enter into politics’ own field of aesthetic possibilities (*The Politics* 64-65)

In other words, viewing political films through the traditional way and determining whether they are “good” or “bad” has the relationship of politics and art backwards. This is especially poignant for the kinds of leftist critiques that must decide whether a film adheres to a certain set of standards in relation to the totality of revolutionary film.

Instead of viewing a cultural object and determining its politics on a spectrum, one must understand how that work of art interacts with the elements of the precarious political moment created by the sensible experience of that artwork. We can no longer compare the aesthetics of revolutionary films in order to pass qualitative judgment on a specific element (or sets of elements), for doing so does not allow the “politics of the work of art to play itself out,” nor does it account for the creator’s revolutionary becoming that entirely relies upon that stylistic agenda. What Rancière’s approach offers, then, is the kind of contextual analysis of art that is necessary for the study of ’68 films—both in terms of a director’s process of identifying with a class position throughout his or her corpus, and the context in which certain aesthetic elements are presented in a particular film.

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